

Grace Upon Grace

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Scripture: John 1:10 - 18

Midnight came. A new resolution made. A kiss and a drink mark time.

Morning fell. A resolution kept. One day gone. The calendar opens wide.

Jesus so prominently displayed in a manger bed amidst the braying sheep gets put away with the carols and the decorations and the Christmas dishes.

We are left to keep that resolution, to make a change, to lead a better life, to make it through the difficulties of the coming year...on our own.

The alarm rings. Get up. No, dream, just a little longer.

Tomorrow. .. I'll do better tomorrow.

Hmmm...

Reminds me of that oft repeated joke where someone is praying her thank yous that so far she has been free from bad thoughts, of gossip, of hurting anyone...and then gives thanks for the new day, having just woken up, and rolls out of bed.

But the New Year has dawned. We have left our beds. We are meant to act in the world. There are challenges ahead and opportunities. We rise to meet them.

I suppose a preacher is a bit like the Drummer boy...the last one to arrive before you leave for action. What can I give you ... you who are so talented, creative, faithful, and kind?

A sword of truth?

A drum calling you to action?

Armor to protect you?

It occurs to me that maybe what we need, in this place where we have worked so hard so long to be the best, where this year the best we give may not be enough...maybe what we need more of this year

is not confrontation or a new battle ground or some kind of magical protection, but rather grace...grace for ourselves and grace gladly poured out on others.

In John's prologue grace is used 4 times and never again in John's gospel. In the scripture read, it appears 3 times, and twice grace is paired with truth. This pairing is a clue that grace is not grace apart from truth.

In the time I spent with family over Christmas and New Years, I found time to delve deep into the classics. One day I was in the room with Rachel watching the Flintstones. Fred and Barney were together when a baby was in trouble and needed saving. Barney saved the baby but Fred somehow got the credit. I came in the middle of the show so don't know exactly what went on but saw Fred get into the mayor's car to go bowling and give speech after speech about being a hero. Yet Fred wasn't happy, even with all the applause.

He wasn't happy until he admitted to his lodge brothers that he had done Barney wrong. The Flintstones was the first cartoon shown to America in prime time so it was important that honesty be rewarded. Fred was given the prize of being Grand Poo-Bah of the lodge, with Barney leading the parade.

It is Barney's being in the lead that is the point of grace. When a wrong is admitted, when an "I'm sorry" is spoken, when we get honest enough to stop fighting for our honor...a door is opened that allows someone to show forth grace. Without truth, grace is an annoying knock on a locked door.

Many of us have allowed doors to lock behind us in our lives, the result of exchanging truth for lies. There are times we've broken something and run. There are times we've sought to be

admired and lost our balance. There are times when truth just seemed to take too much time, too much energy. It was easier to let the lie live.

One more, and one I want to rest on awhile, because the Christian faith, because Jesus, because grace cannot be known without unlocking this door: We too often believe the lie that there are things we just have to grin and bear, and I'm not talking about cleaning toilets, but the stuff of our dearest relationships. We are afraid to be truthful to our life's loves, to admit to them...heck, we are afraid to admit to ourselves, that we have weak spots that require extra TLC. That would mean we were somehow not strong enough to get over the past. It suggests that the wiring of a woman or a man has undue influence over our soul. It might also mean that the way God made us from the beginning wasn't blessed enough to move us successfully through life or be the resounding judgment of just how unfaithful or incapable we are to not be able to meet another's needs.

Rather than admitting the truth that we are flawed...

We allow one door to close after another, like the introduction to Get Smart, each door closes on our beloved until they are far enough outside that we can stay safe. The truth of who we are gets lost behind the locked doors. After time goes by, the tender words of our beloved ones echo like the salesman's knock. No longer knowing what it is, we wait for it to go away.

"He was in the world, and yet the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not receive him."

Unlike other New Testament writings, John's gospel doesn't refer back to the Garden of Eden and the act of disobedience as the original sin. Rather the gospel refers to a darkness, an unknowing, an inability to recognize the one to whom we belong, an inability to receive the one who loves us. The lies shroud us from seeing clearly the *imago dei*... the image of God in us...the realization that we are his children.

Jesus comes, grace and truth together, to lift that veil...

It is tempting to base our spirituality so heavily on the notion of God in us that we think we can live behind all those locked doors, in our inner laboratory where we perfect ourselves. When I had my wedding ring band fixed, the jeweler showed me the flaw in the diamond before I left it with him. He said that was how I could tell it was mine. All those things, as imperfect as they are, the talents we were given and not given, the past, our sex, our sensitivities...they are all that which God has given...they are the truth that makes us who we are.

The gospel speaks clearly: it is our receiving Jesus as we are which leads not to perfection but to a relationship which lasts beyond the limits of this world. It is our receiving Jesus just as we are that enables us to receive both truth and grace.

Receiving, taking upon ourselves, Jesus... like Mary holding him in her arms, wondering at the miracle looking up into her face; like Peter willing to answer his call to walk on water and to cry out for help when he began to sink; like Paul who could no longer live by law alone...

But as long as we believe that to be strong means to overcome ones flaws, ones needs, we are lost in a downward spiraling defensiveness. We no longer see the diamond's sparkle. Don't point out what is wrong with me. Don't suggest I blew it, or I somehow don't do enough to care for you. Why don't you look at yourself? You're the one who needs to change. My life would be good if you got healthy.

Then as a final defense from looking at truth in our own selves, we pull out from the deepest pocket of the oldest jacket in the closet, the list. The list of all the things the one we love has done over the years, that when described by you, any fool could see were done by one very sick in the head.

In this time of prime time reality shows, judgment and elimination take front and center. The Flintstones looks naive, a relic of a more happy past. In our time, it's not honesty that is held high, but truth. It is truth that leads to someone being chastised and ousted.

Truth without grace is a power play, a tool used to shame.

The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Truth and grace, grace and truth, in Jesus, you cannot have one without the other.

I have a Wii fit at home. I have been spending a little time each day on it in hopes of becoming stronger, more balanced. During the fitness exercises, you stand on a board. The computer inside the board is able to measure how much weight you place on each leg of your body. So it knows when you are shaking. It tells you that you are putting more weight, as in my case, on the right side than the left and urges you to continue to practice so that you are more balanced during your day. I find that I'm off balance even more at night or when I'm tired. Even in the morning, under the best of circumstances, it is awfully hard to get the mark at the exact center. The Wii fit balances the unyielding truth of the measurement with an animated trainer who encourages me—the provider of “grace.” He even had a new hairdo for the New Year...ooh baby. It is hard for us humans to find the center between grace and truth, to speak them so fully together that one cannot hear the first without the second. When we try to change another by speaking to them our truth, often grace gets lost. When we try to give grace, love the person even so, often we feel walked on, and truth gets lost. It is even harder when we are stressed or tired or worn out. We all have our own tendencies. People pleasers lean towards grace. Rule keepers lean towards truth.

There's only one who can give perfectly what we have received...

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Judith MacNutt founded a School of Healing Prayer with her husband Francis. In speaking about prayer with those who are clearly acting against God's will, like those who have entered into extra-marital affairs, she said something along the lines of this:

I used to confront people with their sin. They didn't get it. They kept telling me how they deserved this love that they weren't getting at home.

Nothing I could say convinced them to change. Now I ask them if I can read scripture and pray with them. I've found that, during those times, Jesus speaks to them in a way I cannot.

Today, you don't need to open those locked doors to all those who seek to enter in. But open up to one, receive Jesus again into your life. Allow him to speak to you through scripture...if you are not already on a regimen read John's gospel a little at a time. For, even though the word “grace” is not written again, it is illustrated in full color. And, allow him to speak to you in prayer... especially before you decide you need to confront somebody...especially when you feel you've lost your voice. ...especially in regard to those you love. Allow Jesus to give you words that are both full of truth and grace. Wait for them. When the time is right, they will come.

Jesus isn't an ornament to be put away but is the one who makes the Father known each day.

Not a resolution but prayer.

Each day soaking in truth and grace.

The Bread of the Presence, the Wine of the Spirit break open time.

Grace upon grace.